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ABSTRACT

Researchers have long sought to enhance the academic achievement of low income, minority children. To understand adolescents' achievement motivation and persistence, investigations must focus on both the contexts of achievement and the characteristics of adolescent participants. In line with this aim, this study investigated a group counseling class and a remedial math class in a junior high school. Measures of adolescents' (n=47) perceived competence and intrinsic motivation, as well as teacher interviews, comprised the data sources. Using a social-cognitive framework, the analyses identified program characteristics and teacher beliefs and practices in each classroom that correlated with perceived competence and intrinsic motivation. Differences in levels of intrinsic motivation and competence beliefs among adolescents in the two classrooms were accompanied by differences in the teachers' instructional and disciplinary strategies and in their underlying beliefs. Program characteristics also differed. The effects of the differences are discussed in terms of cognitive mediators of motivations, tracking effects, and the unique educational needs of adolescent learners who are at risk for school failure. Four tables present interview questions and statistical analysis. Contains 21 references. (Author/RJM)

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Educational Alternatives for At-Risk Adolescent Learners: Two case examples

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Abstract

This study investigated a group counseling class and a remedial math class in one junior high school. Measures of adolescents' (N=47) perceived competence and intrinsic motivation as well as teacher interviews comprised the data sources. Using a social-cognitive framework, the analyses identified program characteristics and teacher beliefs and practices in each classroom that supported perceived competence, and intrinsic motivation among adolescents. Differences in levels of intrinsic motivation and competence beliefs among adolescents in the two classrooms were accompanied by differences in teachers' instructional and disciplinary strategies and their underlying beliefs. Program characteristics also differed. Results are discussed in terms of cognitive mediators of motivation, tracking effects, and the unique educational needs of adolescent learners who are at risk for school failure.

Educational Alternatives for at-risk adolescent learners: Two case studies

Over the past two decades, researchers and practitioners have sought academic interventions to enhance the achievement of low income, minority children (Bempechat & Wells, 1989; Hudley, 1995). Enhancing motivation, however, must be a central goal of any intervention. Students must feel motivated to persist with schooling if they are to remain in school and take full advantage of available educational opportunities. Thus, assessing the motivational consequences of educational programming for at-risk adolescents should yield knowledge of practical as well as theoretical significance.

To understand adolescents' achievement motivation and persistence, investigations must focus on both the contexts of achievement and the characteristics of adolescent participants. Most often the achievement context is the school environment. Developmental researchers from diverse disciplines are increasingly recognizing the importance of schools as contexts for not only intellectual development but also emotional and social development during adolescence. For example, adolescents themselves identify school circumstances as a primary source of negative emotions (Larson & Richards, 1994) in their lives. Understanding the complex relationship between adolescents and schools has become a significant line of inquiry in research on adolescent development.

However, educational research has yet to develop a descriptive data base of the phenomena of classroom life,

analogous to the naturalistic, pre-experimental phase that has been prominent in the developmental history of the natural sciences (Schoggen, 1991). To develop such a data base, descriptive case studies are best able to capture the complex web of social variables in classrooms which influence actions and determine their outcomes (Stenhouse, 1981). Further, to obtain an accurate, comprehensive picture of classroom practices and procedures, the teacher must be a key informant.

The teacher-student relationship and the classroom milieu are environments in which achievement motivation can be either developed, sustained, or diminished (Deci & Ryan, 1987). A social cognitive perspective on achievement motivation evaluates the meaning and purpose that the individual assigns to a given activity. Motivational research within this framework has typically focused on two types of purposes, or goals: mastery and performance (Wentzel, 1991).

Mastery goals focus student interest on developing new skills and competencies for largely intrinsic reasons and the value of effort in achieving these goals. Intrinsic motivation, a tendency toward active exploration of the environment based on a need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 1992), is thus inherent in a mastery goal orientation. Performance goals, on the other hand, focus student interest on social comparison and normative standards of success that are extrinsic to the task of learning. Intrinsically motivated learning has been linked to higher levels of conceptual learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987), cognitive flexibility (McGraw & McCullers, 1979) and self-esteem (Ryan &

Grolnick, 1986). Self-esteem may also be inferred from a discrepancy between perceptions of competence and judgment of the importance of a particular domain (Renick & Harter, 1988). Self-worth should be low if perceived competence is low in those areas judged to be important. Self-esteem is believed to be unaffected by areas perceived to be relatively unimportant.

Academic tracking systems are one clear, public message concerning the intellectual competence and accomplishments of adolescents (Oakes, 1985). These homogeneous ability groupings have been shown to be negatively related to some adolescents' self-esteem, competence beliefs, and beliefs about their future prospects (Irvine, 1990; Oakes, 1985). Oakes (1985) found that low track adolescent students consistently reported lower levels of interest and engagement in school tasks, which sounds remarkably similar to low levels of intrinsic motivation.

The present research explored several features of educational interventions provided to low achieving, minority adolescents. The data reported here were collected in one of two classrooms in a school which employed a flexible tracking system: a group counseling elective class for students perceived to be at-risk for school failure and a math class which enrolled low-achieving students in the remedial track. Perceived competence and levels of intrinsic motivation for academic tasks were assessed for adolescents enrolled in these educational programs by means of student self-reports. Data also included teacher interviews and reviews of curriculum materials and lesson planning documents. Data from teachers were collected to

identify policies and underlying beliefs concerning external (i.e., teacher) evaluation and control, social comparison (e.g., public evaluation), and students' competence. I searched for evidence of classroom features which might influence students' perceptions of competence and intrinsic motivation, wondering if intrinsic motivation for academic activities would vary systematically as a function of these features.

School Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in 2 classrooms in a junior high school of approximately 780 students in Southern California. Each of the classrooms provided services to low achieving, ethnic minority, eighth grade students. The majority (80%) of the student body was identified as African-American, and 20% were identified as Hispanic. Thye estimated district transience rate was 33% each year, meaning that one-third of these adolescents changed schools or left the system during the academic year.

Each of the classrooms in this study provided services to low achieving eighth grade adolescents. Students in the two classrooms (N=47) did not differ significantly by age (m's were 12.8, and 13.2 for the guidance and remedial classrooms). All adolescents were fully proficient in English, of average intelligence, and none were receiving special education services at the time of the study. Informed parental consent as well as student assent was obtained for every adolescent in each class prior to data collection.

Guidance class selection. At the time of the study, this was the only program of its kind in the state and was awarded to

the school by the state Department of Education through a competitive proposal process. Adolescents were recommended to this program by their guidance counselors if they were of below average achievement (measured by an overall GPA of C- or lower and enrollment in at least one remedial class), were having adjustment problems but not severely disruptive, and were lacking engagement with the life of the school. Adolescents enrolled in this class as their elective, rather than shop or art classes. The class randomly selected for inclusion served eighth grade students (n=23), 18 African-Americans and 5 Hispanics.

Guidance teacher characteristics. The guidance counselor, Mr. S., was an Anglo male credentialed as both a math teacher and a school counselor. This was his first counseling assignment; he completed his advanced degree during the initial year of the program. He has been the counselor of record for this program since its inception, the year prior to the start of the study. Mr. S collaborated with the principal in writing the school's application and was chiefly responsible for the selection of the curriculum materials and instructional activities which comprised the content of the daily lessons.

Remedial class selection. The school employed a modified tracking system that grouped adolescents for academic instruction according to their levels of prior achievement. At the end of each academic year, faculty in the core academic departments (English, math, science and social science) recommended that students in their classes be enrolled for the following year in either regular or remedial classes. Thus students could be

assigned to remedial classes in any or all of their academic subjects.

In an effort to hold gender constant in this comparison, one class was randomly selected from among the remedial academic offerings taught by men. The classroom selected was a remedial, eighth grade math class (n=24 students, 20 African-Americans and 4 Hispanics). None of the adolescents in this class was a participant in the guidance program.

Remedial class teacher characteristics. The classroom teacher, Mr. H, was an African-American male in his fifties with 15 years of teaching experience. Mr. H spent 12 years as a building contractor before obtaining a bachelor's degree and teaching certification. Mr. H has taught both remedial and regular math classes; during the year in which the research was conducted he taught exclusively remedial classes.

Materials

Each student completed the Children's Academic Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (CAIMI) (Gottfried, 1986), a self-report inventory which assesses intrinsic motivation for school learning. All students also completed the Self-Perception Profile for Learning Disabled Students (Renick & Harter, 1988), an adaptation of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985) which contains 10 subscales of differentiated perceptions of competence. The protocol also contains a separate measure of the adolescents' judgments of the importance of each of the nine domains included in the Self-Perception Profile. This measure, entitled How Important Are These Things to How You

Feel About Yourself As a Person, includes two items for each of the nine domains, resulting in a 18 item scale. This version of the Self-Perception Profile was selected because the specificity in self-concept beliefs achieved with this instrument may clarify findings concerning the relationship between self-concept and motivation (Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991). The sample on which this scale was standardized included normally-achieving children, and the instrument has proven psychometrically sound.

I also conducted an individual, semi-structured interview consisting of 18 open ended questions with each of the three classroom teachers (See Table 1). The interviews were designed to assess teachers' strategies for behavioral control, beliefs about classroom co-operation and competition, typical evaluation practices, and beliefs concerning students' competence.

Results and Discussion

The classrooms described here provide quite different educational environments for learners perceived to be at-risk for school failure, a result of both programming features and the respective teachers' educational philosophies and practices.

Adolescents' motivation and perceptions of competence in the Guidance classroom. To assess relative levels of academic motivation, the first analysis compared raw scores for the CAIMI with published norms for the appropriate grade level. Subscale ratings for science motivation were significantly higher than those obtained from the norming sample ($t[173] = 2.33$, $p < .05$). Ratings for reading motivation and social studies motivation did not differ significantly from the norming sample. However,

ratings were significantly lower than the norming sample for math motivation ($t[173] = 3.19$, $p < .01$) and general motivation ($t[173] = 2.26$, $p < .05$). (See Table 2 for means).

Adolescents' ratings of perceived competence and importance were compared for the nine domains assessed by the Self-Perception Profile. The analysis revealed three significant discrepancies. Students assigned writing ability one of the lowest of the competence ratings, yet they rated this skill among the most important of the nine domains ($t[19]=2.99$, $p<.01$). Importance ratings were also significantly higher than the comparable ratings of perceived competence for reading ability ($t[19]=2.98$, $p<.01$), which was given the highest ratings for importance. Students rated appropriate behavior as most important among the nonacademic domains; however, competence was rated significantly lower than importance ($t[19]=2.08$, $p<.05$). (See Table 3 for means).

Guidance teacher interview. The guidance counselor's stated goal was to provide group counseling, study skills instruction, and career information. He saw the program as an effort to reduce school dropout by supporting students in their academic efforts. He also attempted to strengthen the connection between current academic activities and adolescents' future opportunities. He attributed adolescents' school failure to their inability to see the relevance of academic striving to their own lives, based on "little or no available economic and employment opportunities."

To the question "How do you decide what will actually be

taught in this class?" Mr. S responded, "Students are either uninformed or misinformed on issues that affect their daily lives and their futures. I try to correct that by giving them information and giving them some choices in what they really want to study. Then they have a higher interest."

Adolescents brought in daily "check-up" sheets from their other classes, and each had a weekly, individual conference with Mr. S. He emphasized and rewarded relative improvement for each individual rather than absolute achievement level. Names were posted on the board of those making "improvement in their academic classes as both a reward and a model for others. In this school, failing classes is definitely acceptable among your peers. I want them to encourage each other to succeed."

Mr. S strongly advocated firm teacher discipline with a minimum of clear, behaviorally stated rules. He also emphasized students' self-control, believing it to be important for the smooth functioning of his classroom and for the success of adolescents in this program. "I make sure they know that they are accountable for their actions."

Adolescents' motivation and perceptions of competence in the remedial classroom. The first analysis again compared students' scores for the CAIMI with published norms. Scores on all subscales for adolescents in the remedial classroom were significantly lower than those of the norming sample (t's[174] = 4.15 for reading, 6.30 for math, 7.17 for social studies, 4.56 for science, and 5.18 for science, p's < .001). (See Table 2 for means).

Importance ratings for general intellectual ability were marginally higher ($t[20]=1.79$, $p<.09$) than were ratings of perceived general intellectual competence. In addition, the discrepancy between ratings of competence and importance for reading also approached significance ($t[20]=1.74$, $p<.10$). These two importance ratings were the highest scores recorded in any domain for this group. These were also the only two subscales in the entire scale for which mean ratings exceeded the midpoint of the four point scale (See Table 4 for means).

Remedial teacher interview. Mr. H defined the goal of tracking as instructional effectiveness, by restricting the range of student abilities. Mr. H felt also that reduced competition from "more able students" promoted a positive self-concept for low track adolescents, because some of them lacked the ability to compete. He was hopeful that these adolescents "will put for the effort to improve here in junior high, but for some of them it's just too late, for one reason or another."

Mr. H's preferred instructional strategies consisted of whole-class lecture, individualized instruction, and peer tutoring. He presented a math assignment at the board, then had the adolescents practice that skill during class and for homework. Once adolescents demonstrated mastery, they were either paired with a slower student for peer tutoring or given enrichment activities ("sports math problems, math puzzles") to complete until the class was ready to move on to the next topic. "If you didn't get it, I try to use the stronger students to help the slower ones." Mr. H did not place adolescents in larger

groups for any kind of cooperative activity. He felt students were off task "they chat and play around mostly. I also don't know who's honest, who'll cheat, and so forth."

In response to the question "How do you decide what will actually be taught in this class?" Mr. H took sole responsibility for the selection of topics to be studied; adolescents had little voice in choosing material to study. He felt bound by the "curriculum set by the department for this level class; it has to be standard across all the classes". The sequence of topics was also of importance. "Students who have never mastered borrowing in subtraction, for instance, will have great difficulty understanding the method of working out long division.

Mr. H's grading policy was to record a letter grade for each test and assignment; each student's cumulative average became the report card grade for the respective marking period. He gave "immediate feedback where they can grade their own papers" as soon as they completed the assignment. Mr. H also had students check each other's homework papers as the opening activity for each class period.

Mr. H emphasized the importance of teacher control when asked about his strategies for classroom management. At the front of the class, he had posted a seven point "code of conduct" supplied by the school district headquarters. "The class is not conducive to teaching or learning if students don't follow the rules. I say 'It's not for me; it's to prevent chaos in the room, make it quiet and more conducive to learning for you'."

He advocated "talking to kids and win them over on a

personal level, let them know they can trust me. Instead of punishing them I'll say 'Is there anything wrong? Can I help?' I think positive reinforcement, only positive, is so important." However, he lamented the removal of corporal punishment as a discipline option for its effect as a deterrent. "I'm of the old school. I don't believe in hitting people, but the fact that you had them in an undefined situation was very forceful. Now you can't touch a kid, not that you want to. But they know it, and they tell you that. And it's been quite a disservice to the schools."

Discussion. Student motivation indeed varied between the two classrooms, as did teacher beliefs and practices; thus the initial research question has been answered in the affirmative. The data reported here identifies clear differences between these two teachers and equally clear differences between the levels of intrinsic motivation and competence beliefs in the two classrooms.

Adolescents' ratings of intrinsic motivation in the remedial math class were quite low, consistent with prior research findings that low track students feel greater apathy, disengagement, and lack of interest in class activities (Oakes, 1985). However, low track adolescents' ratings of motivation in the guidance classroom exceeded the published norms for one of the five subscales and did not differ for two others. Significant discrepancies between perceived competence and importance ratings for adolescents in the remedial math class were largely absent. Perceived competence and importance are

largely given low ratings by these students. In essence, they saw themselves as marginally competent in domains that are relatively unimportant. Guidance students saw themselves as fairly competent in domains that are important.

The teachers' varying styles and philosophies are a plausible source of observed differences in intrinsic motivation and competence beliefs. While the guidance teacher explicitly attributed adolescents' low achievement to social disadvantage and structural inequalities, the remedial teacher made an internal attribution to adolescents' limited intellectual abilities to explain their low achievement. Further, the guidance class teacher provided the greater amount of choice in academic activities and was the advocate of cooperative learning groups and independent, interest driven projects. In the remedial class, where adolescents reported levels of intrinsic motivation significantly below the norming sample, the teacher was committed to a mandated curriculum and provided little student choice in core activities. Student interest, fundamental to several theories of motivation (deCharms, 1968, Deci & Ryan, 1985), is differentially attended to in the two classrooms. Perhaps classrooms with maximal amounts of autonomy in personally relevant classroom activities more readily support intrinsic motivation in adolescents.

However, differing subject matter and curricular expectations may have introduced constraints to the remedial math teacher that were not present for the guidance classroom teacher. The math teacher's need to focus on a specific body of knowledge

may have limited his ability to provide interest driven lessons. This interpretation in consistent with the finding that math motivation was the lowest rated subscale by the guidance students, yet their teacher was free to develop lessons from a vast array of source materials.

Classroom management styles also differed in the two classrooms. The guidance classroom teacher engaged in social comparison and public evaluation of behavior, and an emphasis on precise adherence to a limited set of rules. In fact, behavior training was an explicit part of the curriculum in this class. However, the strategies specifically emphasized the value of personal effort and individual improvement. The remedial teacher used an individualized strategy of private persuasion that emphasized "positive reinforcement" to a more general series of behavioral goals. These data are consistent with a stronger emphasis on performance goals for guidance students in the area of social behavior.

Taken together these data suggest that the remedial classroom is generally organized around teacher control. The guidance classroom promotes mastery goals for academic activities while also emphasizing teacher control and performance goals for social behavior. Yet only adolescents in the guidance classroom display high levels of intrinsic motivation and belief in their own competence. A multiple goals perspective suggests that students must pursue both mastery and performance goals to insure school success (Wentzel, 1991). Multiple goals may combine additively to enhance school engagement and performance. For

example, public evaluation may be perceived as informational feedback that assists students in achieving socially appropriate behavior. Feedback can be characterized as informational if it supports competence, as controlling if it pressures recipients to think and behave by rote, and as amotivating if it signifies incompetence (Deci & Ryan, 1992). Thus, a teacher's emphasis on behavioral standards may support intrinsic motivation if the expectations are presented as guidelines for behavioral competence rather than punitive, disciplinary directives to be followed without question. Clearly presented and consistently enforced behavioral expectations are a hallmark of schools which successfully educate children at-risk for school failure (Edmonds, 1986) and members of oppressed minorities (Irvine, 1990). Conversely, ability tracking may constitute amotivating feedback if one is in a low track, or remedial class. Low track or remedial placement may logically serve as a strong message of incompetence. Thus intrinsic motivation would be expected to be depressed among lower track students; however, the guidance class may have served as a contravening, supportive environment for enrolled adolescents.

Educational Importance

These case examples have identified a unique mix of teacher variables (e.g., instructional methods) and program characteristics in these two classrooms. Detailed descriptions and close observations of educational settings are necessary ingredients for a full understanding of the contexts of teaching and learning. Multiple and often transitory educational

innovations occur in communities of teachers and learners who actively construct the subjective reality in which these innovations are conducted. Case study techniques are particularly able to provide ecologically valid accounts of this reality (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984).

However, the limitations of the present study require that the results be interpreted with caution and that these results be expanded upon by future research incorporating more rigorous methodological controls. The present design can not account for influences on motivation outside the particular classrooms studied, either from prior school experiences, other current classes, or from the home. In addition, the curricula of the two classes are not equivalent (supplemental socio-motivational instruction vs academic subject matter). Future research should concentrate on the interaction of curricular content and teacher characteristics and how these factors impact student achievement and motivational outcomes. Systematic longitudinal research is perhaps the only means of assessing the full impact of these programs on the life chances of the participants.

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Table 1

Questions for teacher interviews

Background Information

·How did you get into teaching? What is your present position?

·How long have you been in your present position? a previous position?

·Tell me about your preparation to become a teacher.

Instructional Goals

·What is the overall goal of this (guidance) (remedial) program?

·How does this particular program benefit students? teachers?

·What do you most want your students to accomplish in this class?

Teaching Strategies

·What specific techniques or strategies do you prefer for teaching this class? Why?

·How do you decide what will actually be taught in this class?

·What is your grading policy? How did you develop this policy?

·How are students made aware of their standing in this class?

Discipline Strategies

·What rules are important for maintaining order in class?

·Why are these rules important?

·What are your strategies for maintaining classroom control?

Table 2

Student Ratings of Intrinsic Motivation vs. Published Norms

	Guidance (n=23)	Remedial (n=24)	Norming Sample (N=152)
	M (sd)	M (sd)	M (sd)
Reading	85.65	73.31***	86.17
	(17.1)	(13.9)	(14.0)
Math	84.35**	75.64***	96.93
	(18.0)	(13.5)	((15.9)
Social	91.65	67.68***	92.47
Studies	(11.3)	(11.9)	(16.1)
Science	94.95**	76.82***	91.71
	(11.7)	(13.7)	(14.9)
General	64.45**	59.68***	69.0
	(10.0)	(8.9)	(8.0)

Note. Probabilities represent two-way comparisons between row means for individual classrooms and norming sample.

**=p<.01 ***=p<.001

Table 3

Guidance classroom students' ratings of perceived competence and importance

	Competence[a]		Importance[a]	
	M	(sd)	M	(sd)
General Ability	3.03	(.7)	3.39	(.7)
Reading	3.03**	(.7)	3.47**	(.7)
Math	2.90	(1.0)	3.31	(.9)
Spelling	3.31	(.7)	3.03	(1.0)
Writing	2.68**	(.7)	3.31**	(.7)
Social Skills	2.81	(.5)	2.74	(1.0)
Personal Appearance	2.64	(.9)	2.91	(1.0)
Athletic Skills	2.82	(.7)	2.87	(1.1)
Behavior	2.87*	(.7)	3.26*	(.7)

Note. Probabilities represent differences between row means. Higher numbers indicate greater perceived competence and importance.

[a]n=23.

*=p<.05 **=p<.01

Table 4

Remedial classroom students' ratings of perceived competence and importance

	Competence*		Importance*	
	M	(sd)	M	(sd)
General Ability	2.61	(.7)	3.07	(.7)
Reading	2.77	(.8)	3.29	(.5)
Math	2.57	(.8)	2.96	(1.0)
Spelling	2.77	(.8)	2.75	(.9)
Writing	2.50	(.7)	2.18	(.8)
Social Skills	2.97	(.6)	2.54	(.8)
Personal Appearance	2.59	(.7)	2.61	(.7)
Athletic Skills	2.49	(.5)	2.29	(.6)
Behavior	2.50	(.7)	2.57	(.9)

Note. Higher numbers indicate greater perceived competence and importance.

*n=24.